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The Blue Baby
And Other Stories

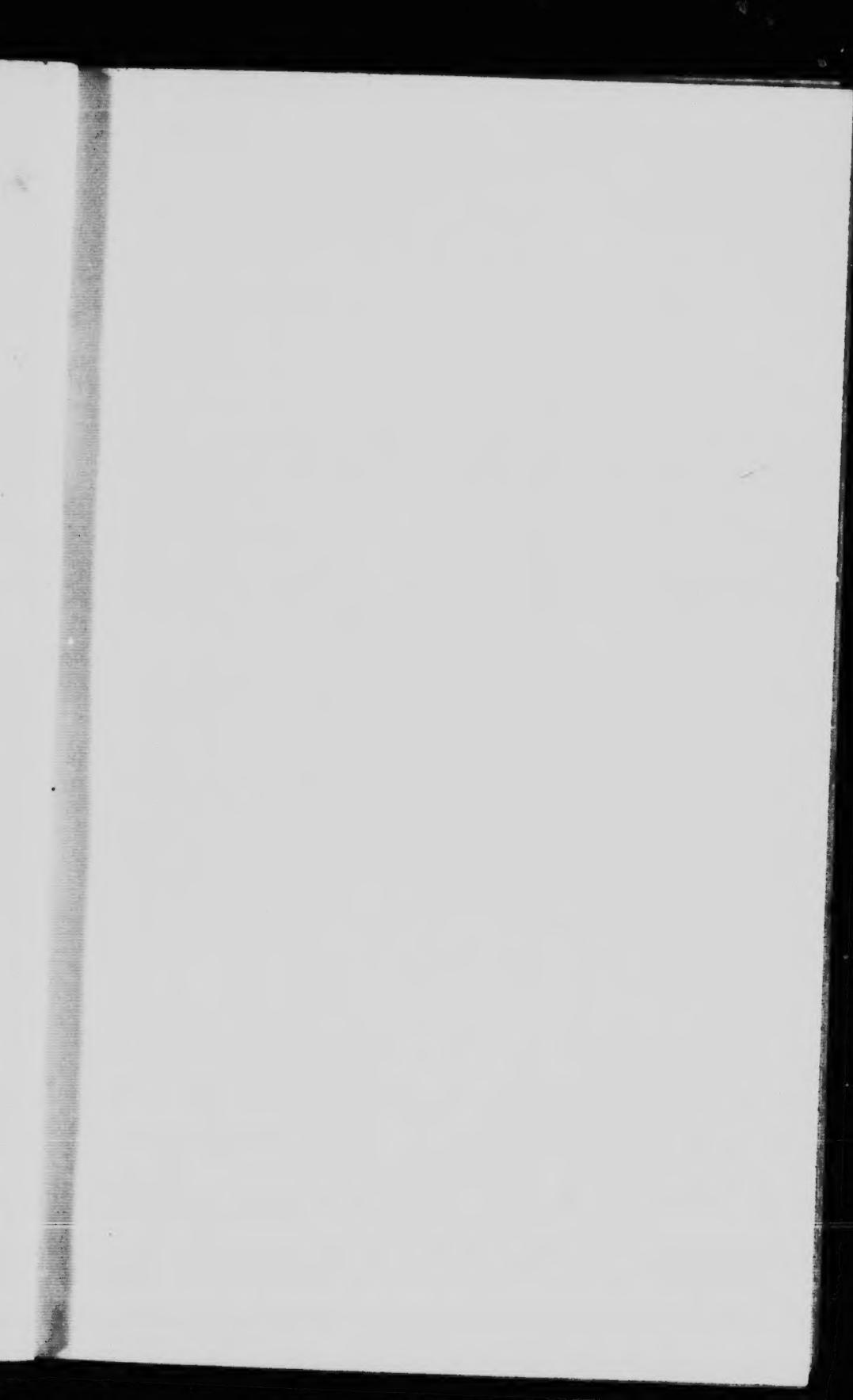
BY THE SAME AUTHOR.

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A TINY DARLING IN BLUE.

The Blue Baby

and

Other Stories

By
Mrs. Molesworth
Author of
“An Enchanted Garden,” “Carrots,” etc.
PICTURED BY MAUD C. FORSTER

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DEDICATION

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To Our Baby

Cynthia

Juliet

Grant-Duff

Ainslie

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Advent Sunday

1900

Contents

	PAGE
THE BLUE BABY	3
THE MONKEY ON THE BARREL- ORGAN	25
BENJY'S FAIRY	55
"A BIT LONESOME"	65
MISS-SENT LETTERS	77
A COW WITH NINE LIVES	105
A REMARKABLE CHICKEN	117



List of Illustrations

A TINY DARLING IN BLUE . *Frontispiece*

	PAGE
"HER'S GOING WIF TINY GEE-GEE'S"	5
SHE WAS A QUEER LITTLE FIGURE	31
SHE VENTURED TO GIVE THE MONKEY A PENNY . . .	50
BENJY'S FAIRY	60
"IT'S A BIT LONESOME SOMETIMES"	73
"I WONDER IF IT IS THERE WHERE THAT HANSOM IS STANDING" .	85
THEY ALL BEGAN THANKING HIM .	90
BEAUTY MIGHT HAVE LANDED IN SOME OTHER LITTLE COVE .	113
"IT'S THE HOLLER TREE—THE HOLLER WALNUT-TREE, MASTER ARTHUR"	121



THE BLUE BABY

B



THE BLUE BABY

PART I



E thought her rather "spoilt" when we first noticed her, and perhaps we were right. She didn't mean it, though ; it was just her "way."

It was at Wavebeach—everybody knows the place under its real name, but I prefer not to give that.

We were not very old ourselves then—dear me, dear me, it is a long time ago ! How nice it was to be young—at least, so it seems to look back upon, but there were troubles then too. We had had some trying illnesses and long anxiety, and one among us who did *not* get

THE BLUE BABY

better, and—you don't feel things like that any less severely because you are young.

They sent some of us to Wavebeach for a change, and no doubt it did us good. There were days when it was difficult to believe it was all true ; days of such exquisite sunshine and seashine, such lovely fresh life that we almost cheated ourselves into forgetting. But it was not real forgetting, it could not be.

No, the best times of all were the times of real remembering, of feeling down in the very bottom of our hearts that all the beauty and the sweetness of life here only mean something still better and more lasting—something that our dear one was ready for, that the troubles she too had known had *made* her ready for.

It was very soon after we came to Wavebeach that we first saw the Blue Baby.





"HERS GOING WIF TINY GEE-GES."

THE BLUE BABY

We were walking up and down the esplanade, or whatever it is they call it at Wavebeach—we had passed several little parties of children, some of whom we already knew by sight, when we heard a very shrill, very determined little voice just behind us.

"Top, top, top to *wunst*," it said.
"Her's going wif tiny gee-gees."

And glancing round, there she was—the Blue Baby, giving her orders to the nurse who was pushing her perambulator, and evidently with no idea of not being obeyed.

She did look so pretty—a real wax-doll of a child—with bright pale-golden hair all in a curly fluff, a face of lilies and roses, and blue, blue, oh *such* blue eyes, matching her little coat and hood and ribbons, which were all of a lovely sky-blue shade.

The "tiny gee-gees" were a pair of goats in a little carriage, and the boy they belonged to, eager for a hire, stood

THE BLUE BABY

grinning beside the imperious young lady, in spite of poor nurse's endeavours to get past him and so to take her charge out of the way of temptation.

We felt sorry for her, and charmed as we were by the baby's beauty we could not help murmuring—

“What a spoilt little person!”

There were not many people about—it was early—and nurse, a pleasant, rather anxious-faced young woman, turned to us for the sympathy she must have seen was ready for her.

“If he would but understand,” she said, with a glance at the goat-carriage boy; “I *can't* let Missie drive in his cart, for her mamma said it wasn't to be, unless she or her papa was with her themselves. It's no good his following us like that—it only tantalises the child.”

“Our eldest” turned, and in a few clear words put the case before the boy. He grinned again, but moved on. Not so—as to the grin—the Blue Baby,

THE BLUE BABY

though the "moving on" took place as speedily, in the opposite direction from the goats of course, as nurse could manage.

But Missie was furious. She stood up, or as nearly so as she could, for, her venerable age of three or thereabouts notwithstanding, she was securely strapped in, and very necessarily too—she stood up and scolded, as I have never heard a baby scold before or since. There were no tears nor any sign of them in the eyes, now sparkling as if there were blue flames inside them ; the little voice was as clear as a bell, but oh, how she scolded !

" You naughty old 'ooman,—*naughty* old 'ooman. Her'll tell mamma, her'll tell *papa*, her will. And you'll be put in the corner for ebber always, ugly naughty nurse. And her'll zide with the tiny gee-gees away away, and nebber come back. I 'zink you'll be put in p'ison—naughty, *naughty*."

THE BLUE BABY

The poor woman looked perfectly ashamed.

"Oh, Missie," she said, "do be quiet till we get home. You'll have a crowd round us."

Our eldest is not a person to be trifled with. She went close up to the perambulator, making a sign to nurse to wait a moment.

"Little girls must not call big people naughty," she said, "and little girls must not speak so loud."

The blue eyes opened wide, very wide, and stared up at her in extraordinary surprise. What they read in the friendly but serious face looking down at her, who can say? But some baby instinct inspired her with a curious sense of dignity. "Noblesse oblige."

She smiled amiably, held out a little white-gloved hand — the only white thing about her, except the lace of her bonnet cap.

THE BLUE BABY

"How do?" she said. "Dood mornin'. Kite well, tank 'oo," and then, "'Do on, nursie," and our eldest realised that the audience was over, as the perambulator, with a grateful glance from its propellor, moved on.

I don't know if our eldest felt small ; I had not the courage to inquire. But if ever she did, I feel pretty sure it was on that occasion.

After that, we were always meeting the blue baby. That we had not done so before, was simply owing to the fact that she had only just arrived at Wave-beach—that morning was her *début* on the esplanade. She was so clearly to be seen that you couldn't pass her without noticing her ; indeed, she could be perceived ever so far off. And she knew us again, oh dear yes, from the very first she knew us again. Perhaps our entirely black dresses had to do with it, but I strongly suspect she would have known us—our eldest, especially—how-

THE BLUE BABY

ever we had been dressed. And she always smiled. Then she took to waving her little hand to us, and after a bit, somehow or other we all got into the way of stopping to speak to each other when we met. And Blue Baby was always most gracious—one could almost have imagined that she was extra gracious because she wanted us to forget our first meeting with her.

Sometimes she would give us a little news.

"Dadda" had taken mummy out in a "calliage," or some one else, whose name was less easy to make out, had "done away-way," this with the little hand uplifted and the most pathetic shake of the head and tone of voice imaginable, "away-way for ebber always"—Blue Baby knew much more than other people about the future. And one day she was frantic with excitement when she saw us in the distance till she got near enough to tell us that 'e was going a "zidey-

THE BLUE BABY

zidey wif the tiny gee-gees. Dadda was tummin to took her."

And sure enough that very afternoon, when we were driving past, we caught sight of the bright blue speck behind two goats, with a tall figure as well as nurse walking beside her. We felt more than half inclined to give up our drive for the sake of following her up and down and watching her delight.

She was too fascinating. Never once did we hear or see her cry—though we knew she could scold. It was her royal condescension that charmed us most. I can see her now—little hand waving, little face aglow as she caught sight of us, and beaming all over with the pleasure she meant to give us.

"You may kit me," she would say sometimes. But only on special occasions, such as our humble offering of a small posy for her gracious acceptance, or the day on which we told her

THE BLUE BABY

we must say goodbye—we were leaving the next morning.

"For ebber alway?" with that indescribably sad gesture and voice which nearly made the tears come to our eyes, and could only be answered by a shake of the head in return, and a murmur of "I don't know, my sweet."

Though in our hearts we did know it was goodbye "for ebber alway" to the Blue Baby—a baby she would never be again, and an unlikely chance in the tangle of life that we should ever come across her as child or girl or woman.

For we did not even know her name. She was only "Missie," or to us "Blue Baby." I don't think we wanted to know her as anything else, somehow it would have spoilt the sweetness and queerness of our friendship.

THE BLUE BABY

PART II

IT was years and years after.

We were no longer "very young"—none of us. And some were "away-way": out in India, tea-planting or sheep-farming or far out in the world somewhere; others, at home still, but in their *own* homes, busy and absorbed with the cares and interests that in one sense separate the members of a large family, in another, and that the deepest perhaps, draw them more together in sympathy for each other.

Only "our eldest" and I were still together. And to her, I suppose, I, as the youngest, did still seem young.

And one year, quite unexpectedly, some turn of the wheel brought us two to Wavebeach again. We did not care much for the place; we had no special reason for coming there—I don't quite remember why we did come. But all

THE BLUE BABY

the same, there, on the old esplanade, looking much as it had done twelve—nay, fifteen years before, we one day found ourselves.

It was a lovely day—soft and bright and genial—not *too* bright or glaring, and in a quiet, rather subdued way we enjoyed walking up and down and watching the passers-by—there were lots of children, of course. There always are, and it is strange to think how it is so, and yet how they are always changing!

Naturally enough, we began talking of “the last time” we were at Wave-beach, and before long we got round to the Blue Baby.

“Dear little Blue Baby!” I said, “naughty, sweet Blue Baby—would you feel *very* surprised, Nina, if we suddenly saw the blue speck appearing in the distance and that it was she—no older, no bigger—not grown-up into a little girl at all? A sort of fairy Blue Baby.”

THE BLUE BABY

"Not grown up into a little girl," repeated our eldest. "My dear child, you are forgetting. It is fifteen years ago. Blue Baby must be a young lady, a "come out" young lady, most likely, for she was three then."

"Oh dear!" I said, sadly. "Yes, I forgot." And soon after we went in. It was getting rather chilly.

But the next morning it was bright and sunny again, and so, luckily for us, it continued during our short stay at the place. We were out-of-doors a great deal—generally on the esplanade, which suited us, as it was mild enough to sit down when we felt tired, and we got the sea-breezes and the sea-view, the only thing *to* view at Wavebeach, as the country inland is not pretty, and further along the coast where it *is* more picturesque is too far to walk to often.

So the esplanade did very well.

The few days we were to stay passed quickly. It was the last morning but

THE BLUE BABY

one. We felt a little sorry, for the time had been peaceful and refreshing, and the weather lovely. We were pacing slowly along the familiar parade, not thinking of anything in particular, when far in the distance something caught my eye, which seemed in a queer sudden way to touch a special spot in my brain. It—the something—was a flash of bright sky-blue, and at once I found myself thinking of our Blue Baby.

"How absurd!" I exclaimed. "What curious things our memories are!" and I told my sister what had just happened. She did not at once reply, and looking up, I saw that her own eyes were gazing before them in a questioning way.

"What is it, Nina?" I asked.
She smiled.

"I see it too," she said, "the flash of blue. It is coming towards us. Yes—it is just the baby's colour—real forget-me-not blue."

THE BLUE BABY

An odd, dreamy feeling came over me. We both walked on without speaking, and by degrees the blue speck took shape and size. It was—part of it—a large sky-blue knot or bow, of ribbon or silk, in front of a girl's hat, and there was more of the same colour below—about her neck—a shawl or soft scarf of some pretty stuff thrown round her, and this larger spot of colour must have been what had first caught my eyes in the sunshine. And as it came nearer we saw that the wearer was in a bath-chair.

Scarcely an invalid surely? The face that we gradually distinguished was too bright and sunny for that. She was talking eagerly and smilingly to some one walking beside her—a discreet-looking, middle-aged maid, with a rather anxious, though amiable expression of face. And oh, how pretty her young charge was!

Without a word to each other, we

THE BLUE BABY

slackened our steps, and, hardly knowing that we did so, came to a stand just as the bath-chair approached us. We could hear what the girl was saying.

“Yes—yes—I *do* remember, though I was only three. It was just here that

She stopped short. Something in our way of standing or looking struck her. She glanced at us—then at her maid—and then at us again.

It may have been an extraordinary thing to do, no doubt it was—but somehow I could not help it. I knew I was right.

“Oh,” I cried, with a little start forward, “are you—yes, you *must* be, our Blue Baby,” and at the same moment the nurse exclaimed—

“Missie, missie, the ladies in black!”

Out came a white-gloved hand—out came the dimples we remembered of old—we *nearly* kissed her there and then.

THE BLUE BABY

"My ladies!" she exclaimed. "Yes, yes, I remember you. And you remember me! Fancy, I have never been here since! How lovely of you to have known me again!"

"But—you are not ill?" said Nina, when we had a little recovered ourselves.

"Oh no, only a sprained ankle. They sent me down here with nursie for sea-baths to strengthen it. 'Ill'—no—I'm never ill. But, dear ladies, when can I see you again? To-day, I cannot, as my people want me to drive over to see friends at Covebay. But to-morrow?"

"To-morrow?" Alack and alas, we were leaving to-morrow, and by the first train. We told her so.

"It is *too* bad," she said, with a touch of the old imperiousness—"too bad, and I only came yesterday. But we *mustn't* lose sight of each other again. Oh dear, what a naughty baby I was! I

THE BLUE BABY

must earn myself a better character. Oh dear, is that twelve, striking already? I must go for that stupid bath. Have you a card, dear Miss—Mrs.—?"

"Only 'Miss,'" said Nina. "Our married ones are not here. Yes, here is our address."

"And you are sometimes in London, aren't you? Here is mine," and she scribbled some lines on a scrap of paper she tore out of a dainty pocket-book. "Promise, promise to come to see me. My father and mother would be delighted."

So we parted—but, would you believe it, between us, we *lost* the scrap of paper? Nina was sure *I* had it, and I was sure *she* had it. And we had no further vision of blue, though we stayed out late in the afternoon on the chance of her having returned from her drive and being again in her chair.

The winter following that lovely autumn we spent out of England—it

THE BLUE BABY

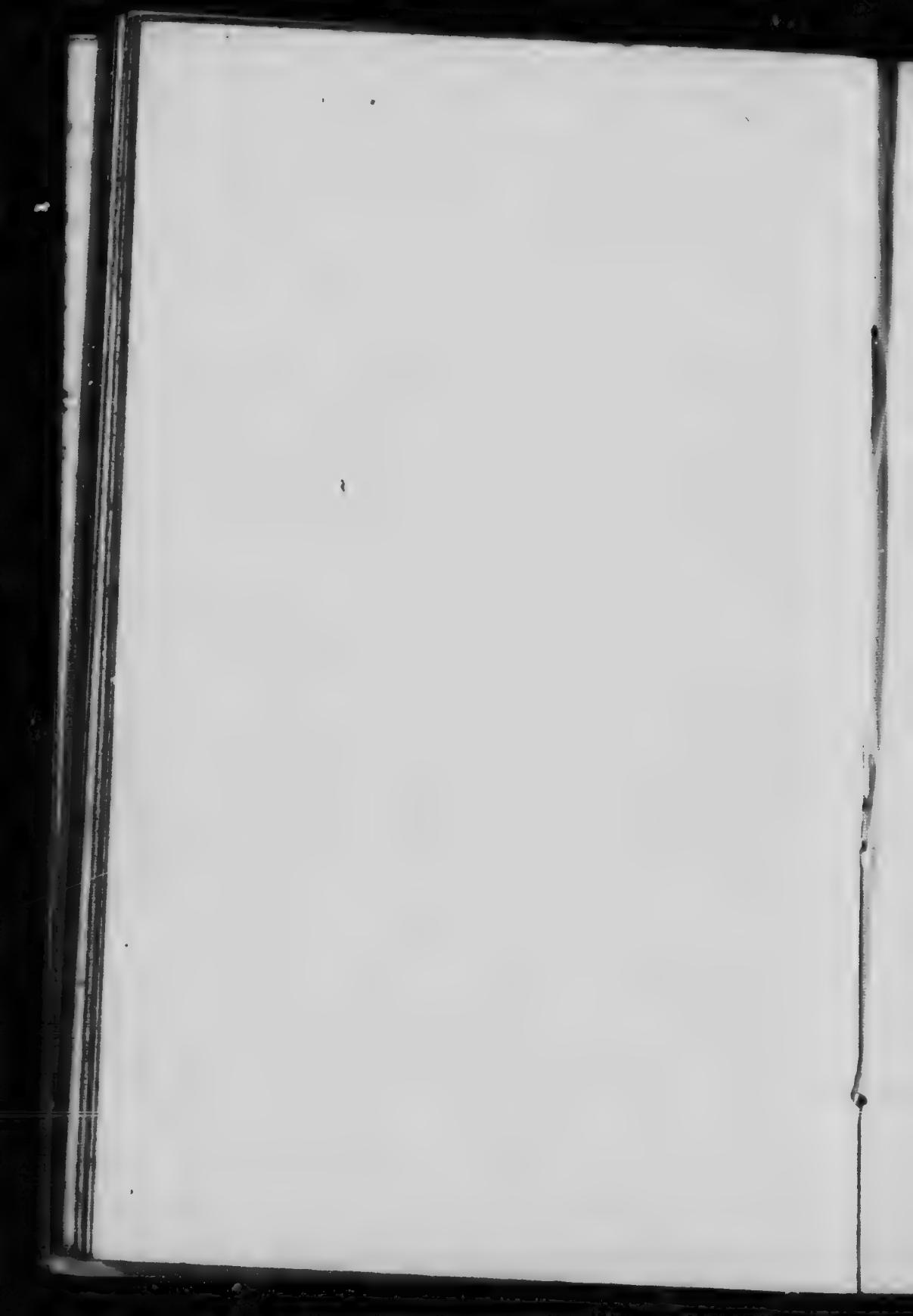
was not till the next April but one that we were settled at home again. And letters *do* miscarry when you are moving about. But very soon after our return there came one—

“Why have you never written to me, or come to see me, dear ladies? I have written to you twice. Will this reach you, I wonder? I am going to be married. You *must* come,” and enclosed was the invitation.

Dear faithful Blue Baby!

We could not go to the marriage, much as we wished. That was four years ago now.

But we have been spending this season in London. To-day is my birthday. She found it out, and a tiny darling in blue has just trotted in to see me, with a great bunch of forget-me-nots and “lots of kisses from mamma”—our Blue Baby!



**THE MONKEY ON THE
BARREL-ORGAN**



THE MONKEY ON THE BARREL-ORGAN

PART I



AMMAS are very kind people and of course they always *want* to make their little boys and girls happy and never to make them *unhappy*, unless any of the children have done wrong, and it is needful, for their own good, to find fault with them.

But even the kindest of mammas may sometimes make a mistake. No one can quite see into anybody else's heart—even into a child's heart—and words may be said which trouble and

THE MONKEY ON

distress those we love best without our meaning it in the very least.

There was once a little girl called Nella. She was about six years old. She had two or three sisters older than herself, and brothers came between, so that Nella—except in holiday time—was a good deal alone in the nursery. And nurse was rather old—too old to be much of a companion to the child, though she was so very kind and good that it made up for her not being as amusing or lively as a younger person. And Nella was delicate, so on the whole, her mamma, who was very busy with lots of things she had to do, felt that she could scarcely trust the little girl to any one as well as the old nurse.

Nella's father and mother were not very rich, and they had several children, so they had always plenty to do with their money. And nurse, who had lived with them so many years that she seemed almost like a relation, was

THE BARREL-ORGAN

very anxious to be saving and careful ; perhaps a little *too* anxious, Nella's mamma used to tell her sometimes.

One of the ways in which the good old woman tried to save money was by doing a great deal of needlework at home. She made nearly everything that Nella wore, and some things that the elder girls wore too. But though her sewing was still very neat and firm, in spite of her eyesight beginning to fail a little, her ideas were rather old-fashioned, and she thought far more of frocks and jackets being "useful" and likely to wear well than of their being smart or pretty.

So Lucy and Rachel and Moira, the three big ones, did not very much approve of home-made garments, and of late their mother had ordered their things at a dressmaker's, telling nurse that she had quite enough to do in making for Nella, and in mending for the others. And even for Nella,

THE MONKEY ON

mamma had given nurse a little hint, though she was very afraid of hurting her feelings. Nurse was too partial to grays and dull browns and "good wearing" colours for mamma's taste, especially for a child as young as Nella.

"Can't you make her next frock of something a little brighter?" she said to nurse one day. "She is not a destructive child; she seldom tears or spots her things."

"No, indeed," said nurse. "Miss Nella is very careful—it's a pity there's not another young lady to come after her, for her things are nearly as good as new when I'm forced to let her leave them off just by her growing out of them."

Mamma smiled. I fancy she thought four girls and three boys were enough without another after Nella.

"Well, then, let us give her something pretty for her best winter frock," she said. "You can choose it the first time you go into Whiteford."

THE BARREL-ORGAN

For Nella's mother knew nothing pleased nurse so much as to be trusted to do some shopping, and it was not often she had a chance of this, as Whiteford, the nearest town, was some miles off.

Nurse considered.

"There's that blue skirt of Miss Moira's, that's too short for her, ma'am," she said. "It's really very good—if I was to get something to go with it for a bodice—it's quite the fashion to have a variety, I'm told—it wouldn't cost much—I can wash the skirt beautiful ; merino washes like linen—and it's a nice bright blue."

"All right," said mamma, pleased that nurse seemed to fall in with the idea. "Nella can stand some bright colour with her dark hair and eyes and pale face, poor little woman. I wish she had some more in her cheeks, like the other girls."

For Nella's elder sisters were all strong and rosy-looking.

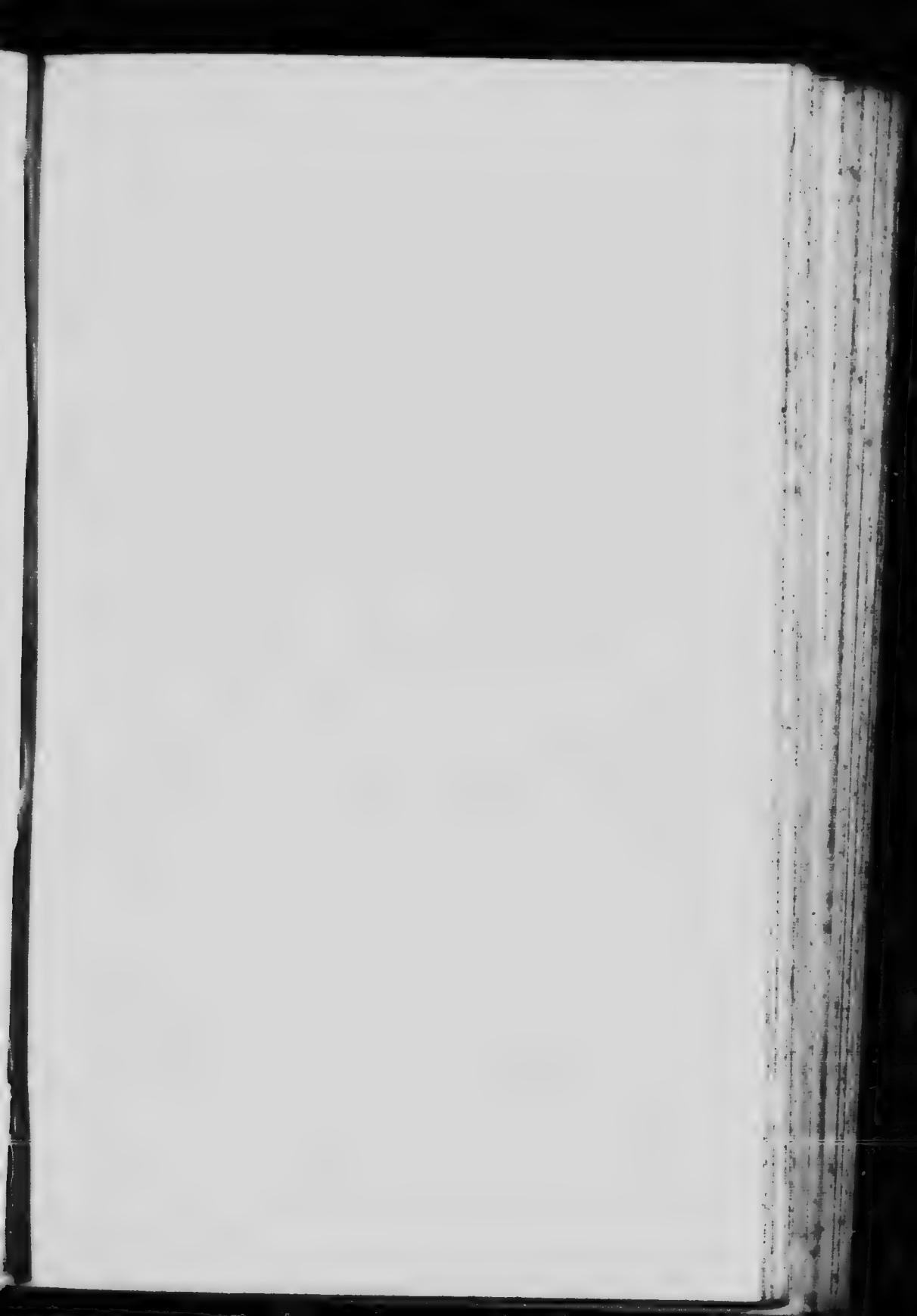
THE MONKEY ON

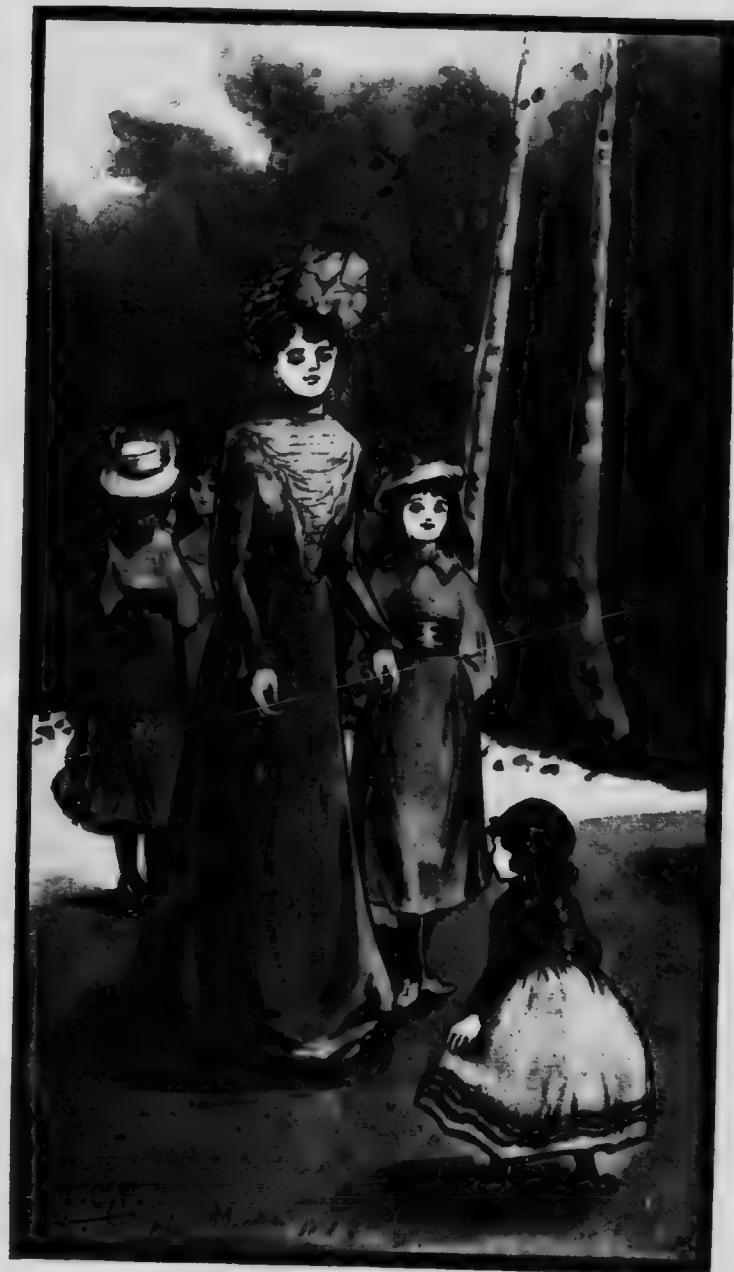
"Miss Nella has a beautiful fine skin," said nurse. "She mayn't have such red cheeks as some children, but there's quite a look about her."

Nurse never liked any one to think her baby was less to be admired than the others !

Some days passed. Nurse had been to Whiteford and came back very pleased with her purchases. And she was even more busy than usual with scissors and needle and thimble for the rest of the week.

Friday was Lucy's birthday, and in honour of it there was to be a little afternoon party. It was autumn—too cold for tea out-of-doors, but not for garden games. So the entertainment began outside, though the children were to have tea in the dining-room and finish by indoor amusements. And though Nella was much younger than any of the guests, Lucy begged that she too might be at the birthday tea.





SHE WAS A QUEER LITTLE FIGURE.

THE BARREL-ORGAN

They were all in the garden—mamma too, as one or two other mammas had brought their little girls themselves, when Moira made a sudden exclamation.

"Oh, mamma," she said, "do look at Nella."

Mamma looked up. Nella was coming towards them across the lawn, and it must be allowed she was a queer little figure. The bright blue skirt, made rather full and bunchy, was trimmed with two or three rows of black velvet, and so was a rather tight-fitting scarlet bodice fastened with gilt buttons. Nella's hair, which was short and dark, made her head look very small, and she wore a round black velvet cap which was the crowning effort of nurse's genius.

"Good gracious!" exclaimed Lucy, growing rather red. "Who has been dressing her like that?"

And mamma, though she laughed, felt vexed too.

THE MONKEY ON

"It is old nurse," she explained to the lady beside her; and as Nella stole up, feeling rather shy, she added half thoughtlessly to Lucy, "Really she does look exactly like a monkey on a barrel-organ!"

Mamma did not mean Nella to hear, but Nella did hear. And all that afternoon the words kept coming back to her, "like a monkey on a barrel-organ." She had never seen a monkey and she could not think what a barrel-organ meant, and for some reason which she could not have explained she did not like to ask.

But the puzzle in her mind made her seem very dull and silent. For she had a strange feeling that though mamma was just as kind and loving to her as ever—even more so, perhaps, for she felt sorry for her little girl—there was something queer about her herself. Now and then a smile passed between her sisters, and once she heard Rachel

THE BARREL-ORGAN

say to Lucy in a half-whisper something about its being "really too bad," and "making us all ridiculous."

What did it mean? Nurse had turned her round and round after she was dressed and told her she *did* "look a smart little lady." And she had come out to the garden feeling very proud of her new clothes, though a little shy too. Anything new or strange always made Nella shy. But mamma had said nothing about her frock—no one had. Only those strange words, "a monkey on a barrel-organ," kept sounding in her ears.

She might *perhaps* have asked nurse about it when she went up to bed, but as it happened, for once, nurse was not there, as she was downstairs helping with the little supper which was to end the party, and only a young under-servant came to undress her. Mamma had kissed her fondly when she said good-night, and Nella heard her say

THE MONKEY ON

something to Rachel, who was looking rather cross, like "Yes, yes, see about it to-morrow. You must not interfere."

And when to-morrow morning came, poor nurse was ill—that is to say she had one of her bad headaches, which often followed her having done too much. So Nella said nothing to any one about the puzzle in her innocent little mind.

PART II

NURSE's headache grew worse as the morning went on. Mamma came upstairs to see her and told her that she really must lie down in a darkened room.

"I am sure," she said, "the pain comes partly from straining your eyes, nurse. You must not do so much needlework."

Poor nurse was suffering so, that she

THE BARREL-ORGAN

had not the spirit to say, as she generally did, that she was *quite* sure she never made herself ill by too much work of any kind, and for once she gave in to taking a rest.

"Nella, dear," said her mother, turning to the little girl, "you must try to amuse yourself this morning as best you can. Nurse may be better by this afternoon, or perhaps you can go a walk with your sisters after their lessons are over. But it would be a pity for you to stay indoors all the morning—it is such a nice mild day you can play about the garden, I think."

"Yes, mamma," said Nella. "I'll do up my own garden. It's not very neat just now."

She looked up half wistfully in her mother's face as she spoke. It was on the tip of her tongue to say—

"Mamma, why did you speak of me that funny way, and what is a barrel-organ?"

THE MONKEY ON

For she thought she knew what a monkey was like, as she had seen pictures of monkeys.

But just as she was beginning to speak, her mother, who was busy and hurried, said quickly—

“What is it, dear? I must not stay just now. Be a good little girl this morning, and if nurse is not better by the afternoon we must think of something to amuse you. Run off now and get your hat and jacket.”

So the chance was lost.

Nella’s “own garden” was in a piece of half wild ground near the gate, though it could not be seen by passers-by, as the shrubs grew thickly between it and the drive. It suited her very well, for as no one came there unless she invited them she could carry out her own fancies in her garden without being told that she “really must keep it tidy.” And besides this, it was close to the wall, which was not a high one, and Nella’s

THE BARREL-ORGAN

brother Mark had made steps in it for her by loosening two or three bricks, so that she could easily climb up it and look over at anything passing on the road, if she got tired of gardening.

This was very pleasant, and she could always hear when any cart or carriage or drove of cattle or anything interesting was coming along, in time to get up to her watch tower, as Mark called it.

This morning she gardened away for some time very industriously, not thinking very much of anything but what she was doing, though these strange words that she had overheard were still as fresh as ever in her mind.

Suddenly she caught the sound of something unusual in the road—children's voices, laughing and shouting, though still at some distance, and mixed with them another voice, gruff and strange, came gradually to be distinguished. Evidently there was some excitement going on, and as Nella was

THE MONKEY ON

getting rather tired of her gardening, she thought it a good time to climb up and see what it was all about.

But for some minutes she could see nothing but a group in the middle of the road, slowly moving towards where she was, while the cries and little shrieks of laughter and the queer gruff voice were still to be heard.

Now I must explain that what happened was not merely a curious "coincidence," as it is called—in other words a "fitting-in" sort of chance. The words which had so struck Nella, "like a monkey on a barrel-organ," had been put into her mother's head by having met an organ-man and a monkey that very morning when she had driven to Whiteford with Lucy, and as it was rather an out-of-the-way part of the country, such travellers in the road were rare, and therefore all the more noticed.

And now the organ-grinder, a poor Savoyard with a rough voice and black-

THE BARREL-ORGAN

bearded face—though if you had looked at him closely you would have seen that his eyes were kind and sad — which made him seem fierce and strange, had made his way along the high-road past the village near which was Nella's home.

He and the monkey had spent the night in the outhouse of a very poor little inn in the outskirts of the town, and now the Savoyard's intention was to stroll onwards till he came to a railway station some miles further off. He was thinking to himself that there was not much to be picked up in these solitary country places, and that he would do better to keep more to the large towns, where, too, he sometimes met a fellow-countryman, or at least now and then some passer-by who understood his language.

But though a penny or two was all he had got in his long walk that day, he was too good-natured to drive away the children that had followed him out of

THE MONKEY ON

the village, and as it was Saturday, a holiday, there were a lot of them.

He was pleased for poor Jacko—or whatever he called his monkey—to be admired ; it kept up the little creature's spirits, and the shrieks and laughing Nella heard came from his ordering the monkey in his gruff voice from time to time to jump on to some boy's shoulder, or catch hold of some little girl's apron.

When he came within a nearer distance of Nella's home, he caught sight—for his black eyes were very keen—of a small figure on the wall, and said to himself that here there would be more chance of some gains, so he stopped short and uncovered his organ and prepared to "pipe up" for the young lady's benefit, while he let out Jacko's chain to the end, ready to send him up to her if she seemed to wish it.

But poor Nella !

She scarcely noticed the man at first—

THE BARREL-ORGAN

all her attention was taken up by the monkey—and by the monkey's *clothes*.

She knew at once that he *was* a monkey; that very morning, though no one knew it, she had peeped at the picture of one, in her coloured book of animals, and she saw the likeness.

We all know the queer mixture of the comical with something strangely sad about these poor little beasts—caricatures of human beings.

But all *Nella* felt when she saw the small brown wizened-up face, the queer sharp eyes, the low forehead, was a sort of terror. Above all, when her eyes fell on the scarlet jacket trimmed with black, and the bright blue skirt ornamented in the same way—on the gilt buttons and round velvet cap, she could scarcely keep back a scream.

Was this what mamma meant? Was she, *Nella*, like this dreadful little creature?

She forgot all about the "barrel-

THE MONKEY ON

organ," though up till now she had had some confused idea in her head of a *barrel* — a cask — rolling along the ground with a monkey sitting on it ; she did not even feel frightened of the black-whiskered and bearded man—all she saw, all she thought of was the monkey !

She must have made some sort of exclamation without knowing it, for the man looked up with a smile. He thought she was calling to the monkey, and he gave him a sort of lift or fling, calling out something in his gruff strange voice which meant "Up, Jacko —climb up."

And Jacko, trained by kindness to perfect obedience, in another moment was scrambling up the wall towards Nella.

She saw him coming—for an instant she was too stupefied to move, or even to scream. Then—when he was almost upon her—with a loud cry, she turned,

THE BARREL-ORGAN

and not looking where she was going, caring for nothing except to get away, she half jumped, half flung herself off the wall.

PART III

NELLA did not hurt herself much by her fall. At first she thought she had not hurt herself at all. She felt giddy and stupid for a moment, but only for a moment. For almost instantly after the shock came back the terror of the monkey, and she sprang up and set off running, without thinking of where she was going or of anything except the little brown-faced beastie in the blue skirt and scarlet jacket.

She need not have been afraid of his following her. His chain was far too short to allow of his coming over the wall, and his master had no wish to let him out of his sight. As soon as he—the

THE MONKEY ON

organ-man—saw that the little girl had disappeared, he gave a tug to the chain, which made obedient Jacko at once hop back to his seat on the barrel-organ, and with a sigh or grunt of disappointment, the pair set off again on the weary journey along the road.

And one by one the village children dropped off. They had no halfpence to give, or at least they had given all they had, and it was not very amusing to follow the monkey and his master now that there was no sign of any more funny tricks being played.

But silly little Nella ran and ran, till she was so completely out of breath that she was forced to stop. And even when she did so, her first glance was over her shoulder to see if Jacko was in pursuit. No—there was nothing to be seen, so she ventured to sit down on a tree-stump standing near. And then she began to feel sore and stiff, for she was bruised in a good many places, though

THE BARREL-ORGAN

luckily not on her head. She looked round her as she sat rubbing her poor elbows and knees—she did not know where she was. The place looked strange to her, though it was only another part of the wood into which the shrubberies of her father's grounds ran on one side. But she was a very little girl, remember, barely six years old, and she had been sadly upset since the day before. It was no wonder that her mind and ideas were confused and quite out of reason.

Afterwards—when she had grown up to be a big girl, she looked back to this time and tried to explain to herself what she had thought and feared. But she could never get it quite clear. There was some misty dread in her mind that if she could see herself she would find that she had turned into a monkey, or that if she was again dressed in her blue and red dress she would become one. Mamma must have had

THE MONKEY ON

something in her head to make her say those words. And she had looked at her differently from usual—the truth being that her mother had felt sorry for her little girl to be made so ridiculous by poor old nurse's want of taste. Nella had not read or heard many fairy tales, but I myself cannot help thinking that she must have known *some*, or even only *one*, about enchantments and boys and girls being turned into frogs or birds. And besides all these confused ideas there was a distinct fear of poor Jacko and his master. She was convinced in her own mind that if the monkey had once caught hold of her, she would have been carried off and made to spend the rest of her life sitting on the barrel-organ beside him.

The result of it all was that she dared not go home. And she dared not go back to the road again even if she could have found her way there. Where to go she did not know, I am not sure that

THE BARREL-ORGAN

she tried to think. Her only idea was where *not* to go. So off she set again, though not as fast as before, for she was tired now, as well as sore and stiff.

On she went, running, though slowly, in a half-blind way, though not crying, and every now and then coming to a standstill for a few minutes, and sometimes sitting down to rest. I don't know what she was thinking about—I asked her once, long after, if she expected to come to Red Riding Hood's cottage or the White Cat's Castle, but she smiled and said she could not remember.

And after running a good long way she must have sat down to rest again and leant her head against a tree, for this was how she was seen by the first people that passed that way—fast asleep!

She was at the edge of the wood by this time—not the high-road, but on a side which was skirted by a lane, and this lane led to the parsonage.

THE MONKEY ON

And the people who found her were the vicar and his daughter Violet, a girl of about twelve, a friend of Nella's sisters.

They had been talking to some one in the lane—who that was I will tell you directly—when Violet caught sight through the branches of the small figure at the foot of an old tree, and darted forward to see what it was—some village child who had hurt itself she thought at first. But in a moment her cry “Papa, it's Nella—poor little Nella Raymond—and she looks so white and strange,” brought her father to her side, across the dry ditch. And the third person in the lane—perhaps I should say the third and fourth persons—followed, wondering what the young lady was saying—and they were none other than Jacko and his master!

They had found their way to the vicarage, the front of which faced the high-road, and there they had been

THE BARREL-ORGAN

kindly treated, as the vicar could speak to the organ-man in his own language and heard his pitiful story, and saw for himself that there was no harm in the poor fellow, fierce as he looked. And now he had been directing him by a short cut to the town where he could travel on by the railway.

So almost the first thing Nella's eyes saw when Violet's cry awoke her was the monkey !

How she screamed, poor little girl ! They had hard work to pacify her. And only when the kind vicar took her up in his arms himself and let her hold on to him tight did she leave off shaking and shivering.

He thought—till afterwards, when the whole ridiculous but pitiful little story was told him—he thought at first that the child was simply frightened of the monkey, never having seen one before. And knowing how bad it is to leave little people with unexplained and

THE MONKEY ON

foolish fears in their fancies, he talked to her very gently, and told her that poor Jacko would never hurt her, any more than the organ-man himself, so that by degrees her terror left her, and she ventured to give the monkey a penny, which Violet's father found in his pocket.

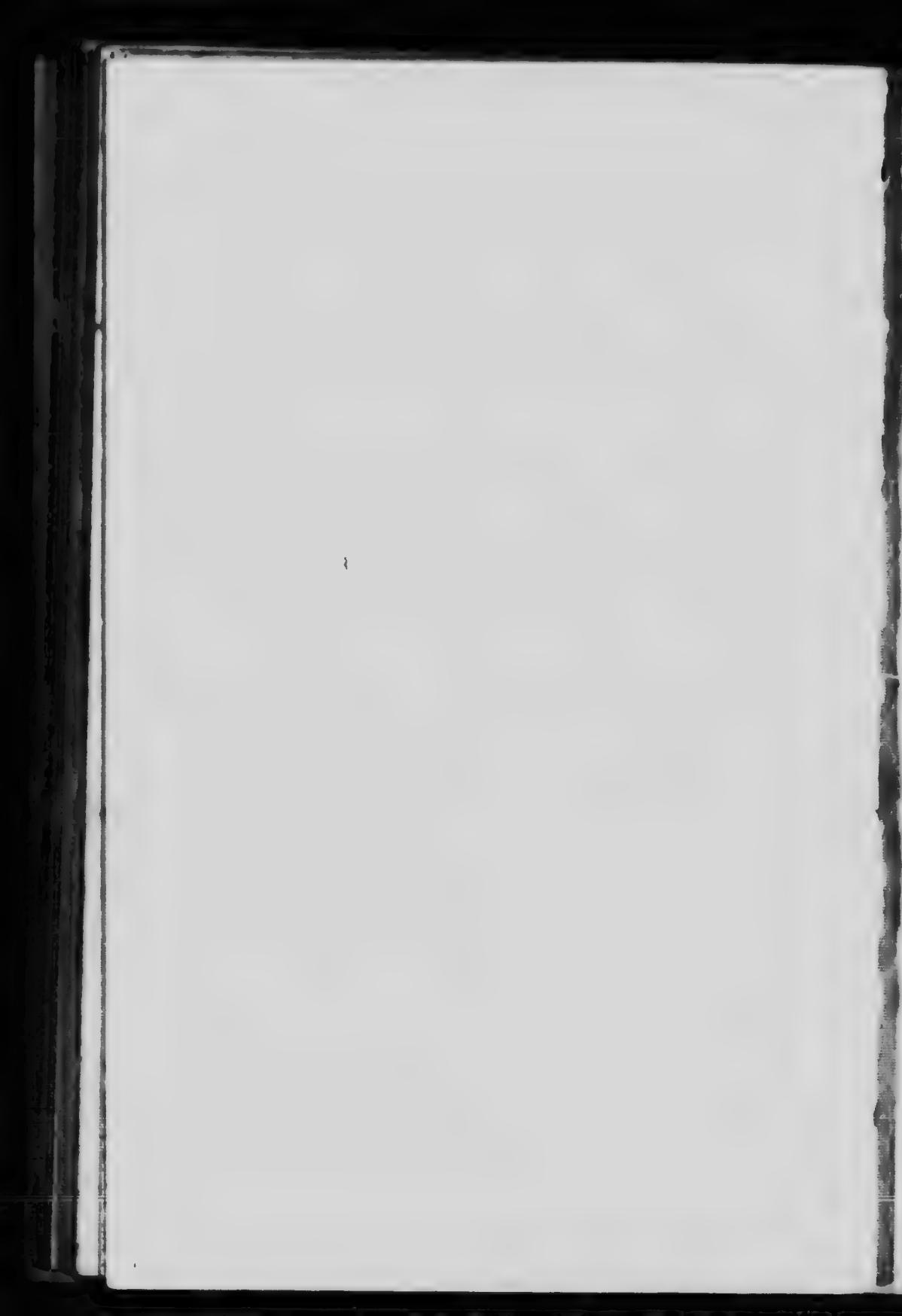
But all the same she was very glad when the two went off, the Savoyard grinning with gratitude and showing his white teeth through his bushy moustache and beard, while Jacko grinned too and lifted his velvet cap in farewell.

Her kind friends took Nella home with them, the little girl clinging tightly still to the vicar's hand, and on the way she tried to tell all that had happened.

Violet understood pretty well, because she had been at the party the day before and had seen the funny dress Nella had worn. And between her and her father,



SHE VENTURED TO GIVE THE MONKEY A PENNY.



THE BARREL-ORGAN

and mother, who came out to meet them, and was very, very kind too, poor Nella gradually became more like herself again.

They sent at once to her home, to say that she was safe with them, and as soon as she could get to the vicarage Mrs. Raymond herself came to fetch her.

"My poor darling," she said, as she put her arms round Nella, and kissed her fondly. "You must promise me never to get fancies like that into your mind without telling me, so that I can prevent you being frightened. My poor little Nella."

And Nella felt quite happy.

But what became of the blue and scarlet dress she never knew—and how her mamma managed not to hurt nurse's feelings about it does not much matter. Any way, Nella never saw it again, and the next time a wandering organ-grinder with a monkey passed that way, she

THE MONKEY

behaved like a sensible kind little girl to the poor things.

She did not even mind when mamma now and then called her with a smile, " My own little monkey ! "



BENJY'S FAIRY



BENJY'S FAIRY



ENJY was only five years old. But you would be surprised if I were to tell you how many useful things he could do already, though

he was so young. He did not think himself so young ; he thought he was nearly grown up, for you see he did seem big compared with Lizzie, who was only two, and still bigger compared with baby brother Fred, who had not had *one* birthday yet, and could not of course be expected to do anything but laugh and crow when he was pleased, and cry when he was not.

He did not often cry, for he was a

BENJY'S FAIRY

good-tempered baby, and besides that, he had so many people to take care of him and be good to him. Mother first of all, and father when he was at home, and Benjy himself. Benjy was very kind and gentle to both baby Fred and Lizzie, and they loved him dearly.

Benjy's home was half-way up a hill—a little cottage perched by itself with a tiny bit of garden all on a slope, and one or two fields all on a slope too. Benjy's father was away at work all day, and though mother was not away she worked very hard at home. For besides the three children she had several other—no, I cannot say *people*—what can I say?—to take care of. I will tell you who they were and then you can settle. They were Ruddy the cow, and Billy the pony, and a whole lot of cocks and hens, not to speak of a beautiful, big tom-cat, who was never called anything but "Pussy."

Mother used to drive to market once

BENJY'S FAIRY

a week with fresh eggs to sell, and sometimes fresh butter and now and then vegetables and even a little fruit. Mother was very clever about all country things, nearly as clever as father, who was gardener at Holly Lodge, to old Miss Needham. Billy was very useful for drawing the cart, and besides the work he did for Benjy's father and mother, he was very often hired out by the neighbours, and in the summer-time when visitors came to the village at the foot of the hill he was hired to take little boys and girls about in a pair of panniers.

Billy was very gentle but just a little stupid, for he was getting old. He spent his life at home in the fields behind the cottage, and sometimes he would stroll further, climbing up the hillside for the sake of a little company perhaps, as there were often other ponies grazing there, and a good many sheep, too, scattered about.

BENJY'S FAIRY

One of the things Benjy was useful in was fetching Billy home in the evening, for it would not have done to let him stay out all night, and there was a nice little shed in the corner of the field nearest the house, where he was quite cosy and warm.

Generally Billy was very good about coming home ; he knew Benjy's call quite well.

But one evening a naughty fit came over him. I must tell you about it.

It was in the autumn, and up among the hills the afternoons get quickly chilly at that time of year. The sun goes to bed early—or at least he *seems* to do so, for the hills hide him from view.

Benjy came in from school one day about four o'clock, feeling rather cold and quite ready for his tea. He had been at school—the infant school—for nearly a year now. Mother was standing at the door looking out for him.

BENJY'S FAIRY

"Benjy love," she said, "put down your books and fetch old Billy in, there's a good boy. I can't see him, he must have gone round the cliff corner, and there are some strange ponies grazing there. He might stray away, for he is getting so blind."

Off set Benjy, hoping to bring the old pony home in five minutes. Yes, there he was—Benjy soon caught sight of him—and a little further off were the other ponies mother had spoken of.

"Billy, good Billy, come home, good Billy," said the little boy.

Billy heard him and stood quite still till Benjy was close to him, then, naughty old Billy, off he trotted, stopping again just as if he wanted to tease Benjy, kicking up his heels and starting away again whenever the child drew near.

And this he did several times—the other ponies enjoying the fun and scam-

BENJY'S FAIRY

pering about too. I am afraid they had been putting mischief into the old fellow's head.

Poor Benjy! he soon grew very tired, for he was a tiny boy after all, and very hot, for he was rather fat and his legs were short.

"Oh, Billy," he called out at last, "you're a werry naughty pony. I dunno what to do," and it was all he could manage not to cry.

Down below on the broad, level road leading to the village a girl was passing—a pretty girl with a nice cloak trimmed with fur, and a scarlet feather in her smart little hat.

She heard the child's voice and stood still to listen and to look.

It did not take long for her to see what was the matter. She was tall and strong, but nimble too. Up the hill-side she climbed, her footfall making no sound on the short thymy grass—then quick as thought she got between



M.C. Forster.

BENJY'S FAIRY.



BENJY'S FAIRY

the strange ponies and Billy, startling Benjy by her sudden appearance—

"I'll 'shoo' him to you," she said, and so she did. I don't know if Billy felt ashamed of himself when this pretty lady appeared, or how it was. But any way, between her "shooing" and Benjy's coaxing the pony soon found himself in his own field, and trotted into his shed as good as gold.

Benjy stood looking at the lady. Then he remembered his "manners" and tugged off his cap.

"Zank you," he said gravely.

"All right," said the girl. "I hope your pony won't be so naughty again."

And in a minute she was down the hillside and hastening along the road with her quick, firm step.

"Poor little chap," she thought, "what a nice rosy face he had, and what good manners! He must have a careful mother."

But Benjy's thoughts would have

BENJY'S FAIRY

made her smile. He was very quiet all tea-time, so that his mother at last asked him what he was thinking about.

"Mother," he said, "does fairies have red feathers in their hats? And curly hair like Lizzie's, and does they speak werry kind?"

What had put such fancies into his head? thought mother. And she made him tell her the story. Then she smiled and kissed his chubby face.

"She was a good fairy to my boy, whoever she was," she said. "And I think the true fairies are those that do kind things to others—whether they are dressed in fine clothes or not."

I am not sure that Benjy *quite* understood what mother meant. But he was pleased that she understood him, and he felt quite sure that his pretty lady must have been a real fairy.

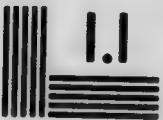
And he keeps hoping that some day he will see her again.

Perhaps he will!

"A BIT LONESOME"



MICROCOPY RESOLUTION TEST CHART
(ANSI and ISO TEST CHART No. 2)



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"A BIT LONESOME"

"The gift without the giver were bare"



AM so glad," said Miss Dorothea Hilyard one morning when she had read a letter which was lying waiting for her at her place at the

breakfast-table, "I really am *thankful*."

"What about?" asked her mother, looking up from her own letters. "I am always pleased to hear good news."

"Oh, it's only about old Winnett," was the reply. "He's been chosen for the almshouses, so I can put him off my list. You know, mamma, he is one of the three old people that Auntie gives

"A BIT LONESOME"

me a shilling a week for. I shall be very glad of his shilling for poor Mrs. Bridges ; she needs it very badly, and she is so nice. It's quite a pleasure to go to see her ; she is so superior to my other poor people. I don't need to cudgel my brains for things to talk to her about."

"Yes, she is a very nice woman, and very intelligent," said Dorothea's mother, "and I am glad that you will now be able to help her regularly, as Auntie leaves you free to choose her pensioners. But poor old Winnett—you must still go to see him sometimes, even though he will not require any help now."

"Oh well, yes—sometimes—I suppose," said Dorothea. But she did not speak eagerly. "I am certainly very glad not to have to go often. He is such a stupid, dull old man, and I don't believe he cared the least to see me except to get his money. You don't know how tired and bored I got after sitting a quarter of an hour with him.

"A BIT LONESOME"

And if I read aloud to him I don't believe he understood, or cared to listen."

"One can never tell," said Mrs. Hillyard. "It takes a great deal of love and patience to get to understand some people—those who have never learnt to express what they feel."

"*Feel*," repeated Dorothea rather scornfully. "Lots of them have no feelings. Winnett feels nothing except anxiety to get enough food and firing, and he's got that now, thank goodness. It meant a shilling a week to him—that was all."

"Perhaps so, but perhaps *not*," replied her mother gently. And no more was said on the subject.

Miss Dorothea Hillyard was what children would consider "grown-up." She was sixteen, and she was very quick and clever, and had a bright, decided way of talking which made her seem older than she was. She was a really good girl, and she *meant* to be very unselfish.

"A BIT LONESOME"

She was industrious too, really never idle, so that she managed to find time for a little regular work among the poor in the small town near which she and her parents lived, as well as for her own lessons and studies, and for helping her mother at home. She was an only child, and the most precious thing in the world to her father and mother, so perhaps she was scarcely to be blamed if she was just a tiny bit spoilt, and a little wanting in sympathy and patience with others.

Her mother saw her faults, and often thought over the best way of correcting them. It was not very easy to do so, as there was almost never anything badly done that Dorothea took in hand, and faults of *feeling* are not so easy to point out as those of word and deed.

"Time and experience will be her best teachers perhaps," thought Mrs. Hilyard, who was so gentle herself, that Dorothea often told her she was too good for this selfish world.

"A BIT LONESOME"

Once a week Miss Dorothea set off for Market Boville, where lived the six or seven poor families she was allowed to visit. It was rather a long walk, and in hot weather especially a tiring one. But hot or cold, rain or snow, it was very seldom the girl missed going. She was strong and well and not easily daunted. She used generally to walk there alone, as it was a perfectly safe country road, and then very often her mother would drive in to fetch her in the little pony carriage.

Two days after the one that had brought the news of old Winnett's election to one of the Boville almshouses, came the afternoon for Dorothea's usual visit to the town. She set off in good spirits, and in good spirits her mother found her three hours later when they met at the post-office, where Mrs. Hilyard often called for the afternoon letters.

"I've had such a nice day," said

"A BIT LONESOME"

Dorothea as she sprang into the carriage. "Mrs. Bridges is *so* delighted about the shilling a week. It's quite touching. And oh, mother, she has begun her lace work again now she is better, and she says she would be so pleased to teach me how to do it. So I'm going to get a lace pillow, and if I give myself half an hour extra every Thursday, Mrs. Bridges says with that amount of teaching and with practising at home, I'll soon learn."

"It would be very nice indeed," said Mrs. Hilyard, "only don't undertake *too* much, my dear. Did you go to see old Winnett?"

"No, of course not," said Dorothea, rather crossly. "He'll scarcely be settled yet—he only moved the day before yesterday. Besides, why should I? It's ever so far round to the alms-houses, and he has everything he needs now. I daresay I'll go to see him some day or other."

"A BIT LONESOME"

But for the next few weeks her Thursday afternoons were very fully taken up. The lace work was very interesting and half an hour seemed no time at it. It was all Dorothea could do to get her other visits paid before the hour at which she had to meet her mother, and more than once she said to herself what a good thing it was that that tiresome old Winnett was no longer one of her people. And if *something*—heart or conscience?—gave a tiny twinge when she thought this, she would not own to herself that she felt it.

One Thursday, however—more than a month after she had begun the lace lessons—a disappointment met Dorothea when she got to Mrs. Bridges'. She had made it the last of her visits, so as to have only a short way to go when her time was up. And now Mrs. Bridges was ill, "*so bad with her head,*" said the neighbour who opened the door, that she thought Miss had better not see her,

"A BIT LONESOME"

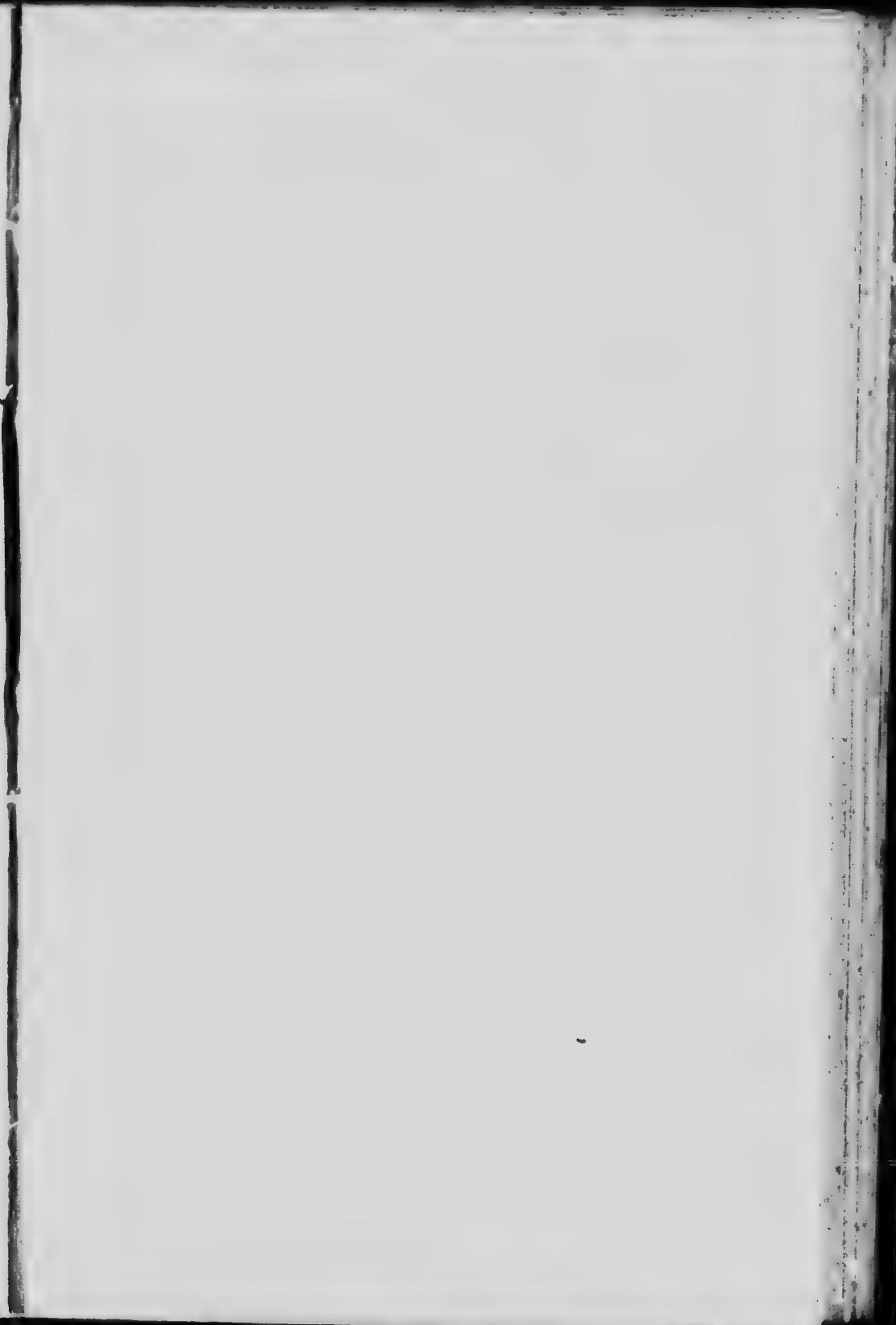
as talking made her worse. Dorothea had seen these headaches, and knew it was true, so she turned away at once, leaving a kind message.

"Now what shall I do?" she thought. "Three-quarters of an hour, good, till mamma comes."

She looked up and down the street—there was a glimpse of the old church spire at the far end—and the almshouses were near the church.

"Oh dear," thought Dorothea, "I may as well go to see old Winnett. It will please mamma."

Five minutes' quick walking brought her to the almshouses—neat and pretty little dwellings, quite after Dorothea's own heart. Which was Winnett's? She knocked at one door and asked. A very respectable, rather forbidding old dame opened. Yes, the old—*person* she was inquiring for lived at the end. Evidently this lady thought herself a long way above old Winnett! Dorothea was





M.C.F.

"IT'S A BIT LONESOME SOMETIMES."

"A BIT LONESOME"

smiling to herself at the idea, when her former pensioner opened his door. His face, which had been dull and rather sad, lighted up joyfully.

"Oh Miss, oh Miss Hi!yard, so you've come at last!" he exclaimed.

Rather surprised, Dorothea answered kindly, and stepping in, began to praise his nice little home. Nothing satisfied the old man till he had shown her into every corner, with the greatest pride.

"It is nice—quite charming," she said warmly, "and you really wan' for nothing now, do you?"

They were sitting in the kitchen by this time. Old Winnett did not at once answer. Then he said—

"Yes, Miss, I've a deal to be thankful for. I've all I need in plenty, thank God. But—"he stopped again—"it's—it's a bit lonesome sometimes," and Dorothea, looking up, saw to her astonishment that there were tears in his eyes.

"A BIT LONESOME"

"I'm—I'm so sorry," she said very gently.

"All strangers about, you see, Miss. And—I did look for you on a Thursday, when I was in the old place. And them tales as you read to me—many a time I've sat thinking them over to myself."

"I'm so glad," said Dorothea now. "So glad you liked them, and liked me coming. "I—I didn't think you cared about it," she was going on to say, but catching the faded old blue eyes looking at her with an expression of affection she could not mistake, she changed her sentence. The other would have hurt him. "I have been rather extra busy lately, but I shall be sure to come now, every Thursday, as I used to do," she went on.

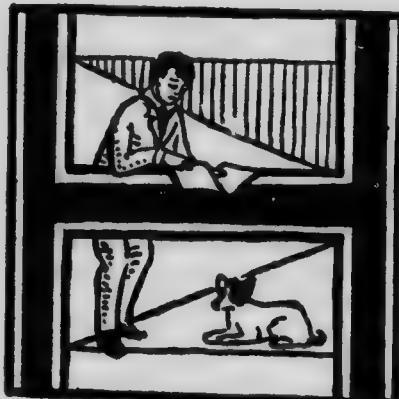
"Thank you, Miss—thank you kindly. You've been so good to me—a-bringing the money so regular. But I shouldn't like you to think it was only that." And Dorothea felt as she walked away that she had learnt a lesson.

MISS-SENT LETTERS



MISS-SENT LETTERS

PART I



"ARRY," said his mother, putting her head in at the schoolroom door. It was holidays, and the boys were at home, spending a good deal

of their time in the schoolroom with their sisters. For it was winter—and *not* freezing. There was no skating and nothing much to tempt one out of doors. "Harry, there is a letter on the hall table addressed to Mrs. Merchiston at 23, Hexford Place, instead of Hexford Crescent. I know who Mrs. Merchiston is, though we have never

MISS-SENT LETTERS

called on each other. And her letters have been left here by the postman before this, by mistake. I suppose, strictly speaking, one should give this letter back to him, but it looks like a foreign one, and I know she has sons abroad. So put on your cap and run round with it at once to Hexford Crescent. It is only friendly to do so."

"Ye—es," said Harry. He was deep in a story-book—a book of thrilling adventures, one of his Christmas presents. "Ye—es, mother."

"Do you hear what I say?" said his mother doubtfully. "I want you to take that letter *at once* to 23, Hexford Crescent."

"I hear," said Harry, "23, Hexford Crescent—same number as this. All right, mamma."

It sounded all right, so his mother, who was in a hurry, hastened off, feeling that she had done her duty.

But Harry, plunged into his book

MISS-SENT LETTERS

again as soon as he had roused himself enough to answer his mother satisfactorily, thought no more of the letter and his promise.

He might have remembered in passing through the hall had the letter still been visible there. But, unfortunately, the newspaper had been thrown down on top of it, and in lifting the newspaper the thin letter got shoved aside. And for the rest of the day there it lay—as well hidden as if it had been done on purpose, just behind the small gong-stand, which stood far back on the table.

Harry's mother did not come home to luncheon that day. She was very busy. Christmas is always a busy time for everybody, especially for those who think of others as well as themselves and their own families. And Mrs. Lockhart was one of these. She was very tired when she got home that afternoon, and it was already dark. Still as she passed the hall-table the miss-sent letter

MISS-SENT LETTERS

came back to her mind. Something she had heard that day made her think of it more than once. No, it was not there. Harry had taken it to its proper destination, no doubt.

The children were due at a juvenile party that evening. They were already dressing to go when Mrs. Lockhart came in. She went upstairs to her own room to rest a little before dinner, as she did not want her husband and grown-up son and daughter to say she was "*too* tired." And Harry and Dick were late as usual. She heard Conny begging them to be quick, the carriage was waiting—so she only opened her door to call out, "Good evening, my dears. I hope you will enjoy yourselves," as the four rushed downstairs, and a moment after the sound of a carriage door shutting sharply and the wheels rolling away told her they were off.

She *was* very tired that evening—

MISS-SENT LETTERS

"*too tired,*" I am afraid. And they all begged her to go to bed early—Isabel promising to see that the younger ones were all right when they came back from their party.

So it was not till the next morning at breakfast that Mrs. Lockhart saw Harry again. She turned to him, after hearing all about the party the evening before, with a smile.

"One of my poor people tol' me a little story yesterday, Harry, which made me think of you and the effort it cost you to look up from your book when I gave you that letter to take to its proper destination."

Harry started.

"That letter, mamma," he repeated mechanically, "the letter I—" and he looked up very confusedly, growing very red.

"Yes, of course," said his mother, "the letter for Mrs. Merchiston in Hexford Crescent. You took it at

MISS-SENT LETTERS

once, did you not? I looked for it when I came in, just *in case* you had forgotten, but it was not on the table."

In her secret heart she began to fear that Harry had not taken it "at once," and that the knowledge of this was making him ashamed. But she never dreamt of the truth—that he had not taken it *at all*.

"Oh, mamma!" exclaimed the boy, starting up. "I'm dreadfully, terribly sorry. But I quite forgot about it. I'll run with it now this very moment and explain that it was my fault."

"Oh, Harry!" said Mrs. Lockhart, reproachfully. But Harry was already out in the hall.

Only to return the next moment, however, with a still more distressed face—the letter was not to be seen! He had searched "everywhere"—quick work his "searching everywhere" must have been—but it was nowhere to be found—it had disappeared!

MISS-SENT LETTERS

Then came a ringing of bells and inquiries of the servants as to whether any of them knew anything about the letter, hopes being at first expressed that the footman might have given it back to the postman, or that the butler might have "sent it round" to Hexford Crescent. But no—nobody had done anything with it, nobody even had seen it except the girl who had been cleaning the steps the day before when the postman left the early morning letters, and had taken them from him instead of his dropping them into the box. She was rather a quick girl, and she did remember a thin envelope which had a strange name on it. And then Mrs. Lockhart herself had seen the letter. Its having been there was no dream.

Where had it gone?

Then came a triumphant cry from Conny.

"I've found it; here behind the gong-stand—the *little* gong-stand on the

MISS-SENT LETTERS

table," and she ran forward, waving the letter in her hand.

Mrs. Lockhart took it quickly and held it out to Harry.

"Run with it at once," she said.
"And—do not merely ring and drop it into the box, but wait till the door is opened and explain to Mrs. Merchiston's servant why it has been delayed."

She looked grave and spoke seriously. She had two reasons for her last charge to Harry. She knew he would feel ashamed at having to tell of his own carelessness, and she hoped this would be good for him. And she had a strange presentiment that the letter was of great importance—she felt anxious to hear something about it.

So, though the rest of the party thought all was right now that the letter was found, Mrs. Lockhart herself seemed anxious and uneasy.

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M.C.F.

"I WONDER IF IT IS THERE, WHERE THAT
HANSOM IS STANDING."

MISS-SENT LETTERS

PART II

HARRY ran all the way to Hexford Crescent. For though he did not at all like what he had to do, he was in the main a good, conscientious boy, and he knew he should feel very sorry if his forgetfulness had done any harm.

Besides, if one *has* a disagreeable task to do it is a very good plan to do it quickly and get it over.

He got to Mrs. Merchiston's in two minutes, for it was quite near. Being a crescent there was only one side—the numbers went straight on—odd and even together—so some little way before he reached the actual house, Harry knew pretty well whereabouts it was.

"Dear me," he said to himself, "I wonder if it is there where that hansom is standing, with luggage on? They must be going away," and he hastened his steps, though he was already running.

MISS-SENT LETTERS

Something of his mother's presentiment seemed to come into him, and he felt a strange nervous anxiety which, joined to the running, made his heart beat faster than he almost ever remembered it beating before.

Yes—the cab *was* standing in front of “23.”

He had no need to ring—at least not for the purpose of having the door opened, for it was standing as wide open as it could be, and there were rolls of travelling rugs and bags just inside, waiting to be carried out.

But for a moment or two nobody was to be seen, and after an instant's hesitation, Harry rang the bell. Before it had left off sounding, a little girl ran out from a room at the end of the passage. That she was a little lady was to be seen at once, even though she came forward to the door to see who was there.

“Oh,” she said, as soon as she was near enough to distinguish Harry plainly,

MISS-SENT LETTERS

"I thought it was the postman again, perhaps," and her voice sounded very disappointed. And then, looking at her, Harry saw that her eyes were sadly red and swollen, she had evidently been crying terribly. He felt very sorry for her. She was a little younger than Harry—about twelve or thirteen he thought, and she was a very pretty child, though just now rather disfigured by her tears.

"I am not the postman," said Harry, "but," and he tried to smile. He felt so sorry for her and yet so shy, "I have brought you a letter, all the same," and he held it out.

The little girl took it from him, at first in an indifferent way—she thought it was a note, and she knew no note could bring good news—but when she caught sight of the thin envelope and foreign stamp, she gave a shriek.

"Oh, oh!" she cried, "it's from Cairo. Wait—wait there a moment," she called back to Harry, who had begun

MISS-SENT LETTERS

to explain the whole thing, as she rushed off—upstairs, so fast that she almost seemed to fly. “Mamma, mamma,” she panted out, and Harry’s ears, sharpened by excitement, caught the words, “it’s the letter—perhaps you needn’t go—perhaps Phil’s——” but then she must have run into some room, for Harry heard no more.

He stood there for some time—it seemed a long time to him. And why he waited, he scarcely knew, except that the little girl had told him to do so, and also, I think, because, feeling his conscience far from clear about the letter, he was really very anxious to know what was the matter, and if possibly he had, without knowing it, been the bearer of good news. Once or twice he turned and looked down the steps undecidedly. What was the good of waiting any longer? Most likely the little girl had forgotten all about him.

But just as he was making up his mind

MISS-SENT LETTERS

to go, he heard a rush down the stairs, and in another moment the little girl, her fair hair streaming behind her, her eyes, though still swollen and red of course, yet sparkling and joyous, came flying towards him.

"Oh, please come in," she said. "Please come up to the drawing-room for a minute. Mamma wants to see you —to ask you about the letter and to thank you for bringing it. I suppose it went to your house by mistake, for it's got Hexford *Place* on, instead of Hexford Crescent. You see, Phil couldn't write himself, though he's *so* much better. Oh it's such good news —you don't know! If only it had come yesterday—but any way it's come time enough to stop mamma going."

And so chattering, quite beside herself with delight, little Gladys Merchiston hurried upstairs again, followed more slowly by Harry, whose feelings were very mixed, as you can fancy.

MISS-SENT LETTERS

He was thankful to hear that he had brought good news, very ashamed to think that but for his carelessness these poor things might have had it yesterday, and very curious indeed to know more —who was Phil and what was the matter with him, and where was the little girl's mother going, and why?

He found himself in the drawing-room before he had half finished thinking over these questions. And then came back the shame and pain of learning all the sorrow his carelessness had caused, and still worse of having to explain that instead of deserving *thanks* he really had to ask for forgiveness.

There were three ladies in the room —one in black whom Gladys called "Mamma," and two other girls older than his first acquaintance. And before he could stop them they all began thanking him, and Mrs. Merchiston hastened to explain that the letter was from a brother officer of her second son,



THEY ALL BEGAN TALKING HIM.

MISS-SENT LETTERS

Philip, who was very ill at Cairo. They had known he was ill, but the friend had promised to write by the next mail, by which time he hoped the worst of the attack would be over.

"And the letter was due at latest yesterday morning," Mrs. Merchiston went on. "I was terribly anxious when it did not come then, but waited for the later posts. When nothing came up to the last post, I made up my mind to go down to Southampton, where my eldest son is—he is a clergyman—and to arrange with him about starting for Cairo. I could bear the suspense no longer. But the girls persuaded me to wait till this morning in hopes of the letter coming. There was none, as you know, and I was just leaving when you came like a good angel. For the news is excellent. Philip is going on *very well*, and hopes to be home in a month. You are Master Lockhart, are you not? I know your kind mother a little—my

MISS-SENT LETTERS

letters have gone to your house once or twice before. Hexford Place is so much better known than our little Crescent.' For the houses where the Lockhart lived were much larger and grander than the Merchistons'. "Poor Phil's friend must have thought we lived there. It was like Mrs. Lockhart to send it at once—you will tell her all it has saved us."

Harry murmured something—then he grew very red and resolved to get it over. Big boy as he was, the tears were not far off before he had blurted it all out.

But how kind they were ! They were too happy and thankful to blame him. And I think that he got *more* and more sorry, the kinder they grew.

He went home rather more slowly than he had come, though quickly still, he was eager to tell his mother all about it. She kissed him when he had finished,

MISS-SENT LETTERS

saying gently, "I am sure it will make you more thoughtful, my boy. And I shall be very pleased for you to go again and see the Merchistons, as they so kindly asked you. I do hope the son will soon be quite well.

Harry was leaving the room when he turned back again.

"What was it you were going to tell us, mamma, at breakfast this morning—a little story that reminded you of the letter, you said?"

"Oh, yes," his mother replied. "I will tell it you at tea-time. It was about another miss-sent letter."

PART III

HARRY LOCKHART's mother had not a bad memory; she never forgot any promise she had made. So when the children were all at tea in the school-

MISS-SENT LETTERS

room that afternoon, the door opened and "mamma" appeared.

Up jumped the boys—there was a rush between Dick and Harry as to which would get a chair for the welcome visitor first, and Conny, who was pouring out tea, begged her mother to have "one cup of ours, even if you do have it afterwards in the drawing-room."

And then Mrs. Lockhart told her little story.

"You remember Mrs. Dear, Conny," she said, "one of the old women I go to see. I took you there with me once, I think?"

"Oh yes, mamma, I remember her quite well. She lives in one of those great model buildings, as they are called, doesn't she? And her room was so clean and nice and she herself such an old dear. I remember saying how well her name suited her."

"Yes—it does," replied Mrs. Lockhart. "She is a very dear, good old

MISS-SENT LETTERS

woman, and I am sure you will think so more than ever after you have heard my story. Last week when I went to see her as usual, I found her looking rather worried.

"'What is the matter, Mrs. Dear?' I said. 'No bad news, I hope?' for I saw that she had a letter in her hand, and I know that letters are a great event in her life. She has only one living relation, at least: only one near enough to write to her.

"'Oh no, my lady, thank you kindly for asking, all the same,' she said—Do you remember, Conny, that Mrs. Dear always says 'My lady'?—'oh, no, my lady, I've very good news of brother and his fam'ly, thank you. No, it's no trouble of my own that's rather on my mind to-day. It's about this letter,' and she held it out to me to look at, saying as she did so, 'Now ma'am, how would you read that address?'

"I glanced at it.

MISS-SENT LETTERS

"' MRS. M. DEAR,
No. 6, D. Block,
Charters' Buildings,
East Whittington Street'—

" I said.

" Mrs. Dear seemed pleased.

" There now—that's just as I said, though I'm not much of a scholar like you, my lady. But will you please look at it again—you'll see it isn't really meant for me. This is No. 6, sure enough, but it isn't "D" Block—and the "Mrs." isn't "Mrs." at all, but "Miss." No, I've took it to my neighbour Mrs. Grimby, and her son, as is high up at school, says it's "Miss M. Dean," not "Dear," at all.'

" I looked at it more closely. Yes, I saw she was right. It was evidently 'Miss M. Dean.'

"' But you mustn't mind about it, Mrs. Dear,' I said, for I saw that the letter was open, and I thought she was

MISS-SENT LETTERS

vexing herself on that account, 'no one could blame you for having opened it.'

"She looked up quite innocently : such an idea had never occurred to her.

"'Oh no, my lady, it's not that, I'm troubling after,' she said. 'It's fearing the poor things will be so put about at not getting the letter,' and then she went on to tell me what it was about. For the Grimby boy had read it out to her ; by herself, poor dear, I don't think she could have made much sense of it. It was a letter from a lady to engage a girl or young woman as nurse—the lady said she had had a good account of her, but that the nurse must answer *at once*, as there was another person applying for the situation, who would suit very well also, and who could come immediately. 'So,' said the letter, 'if I do not hear from you at once, I shall engage the other, as I cannot run the risk of losing her.'

MISS-SENT LETTERS

"I agreed with Mrs. Dear that it was a pity.

"'But why don't you give it back to the postman and tell him to take it to the right place?' I said.

"My old woman shook her head.

"'I misdoubt me the poor thing wouldn't get it in time if I did that. The postmen don't trouble overmuch about letters for the Buildings, and even if he did his best, it'd take a deal of time to ax at all the Blocks for Miss Dean. No, I'm right down worried-like about it. If I could go round myself, now.'

"'No, indeed, Mrs. Dear,' I said, 'you mustn't think of such a thing. It's raining hard and it's very cold—and you with your rheumatism.' And then as it was getting late and I had to hurry home, I left her. And I thought no more about it—

"Till yesterday—and then when I went to see Mrs. Dear, I found her in

MISS-SENT LETTERS

bed. She had had a sharpish attack of rheumatism, but she assured me it was much better, and I must say she seemed in very good spirits — very cheery indeed.

"But how did you catch cold?" I asked her. "When I saw you last week you were very well."

"The poor old body looked very guilty. Then at last it came out.

"I can't deceive you, my lady," she said, "and that's the truth of it. I didn't do as you told me, and you must forgive me. After you had gone that day I just sat worritting and worritting about that poor girl and the letter. And at last—it wasn't raining so bad by then—I could bear it no longer. And I puts on my pattens and my cloak and I takes my umbrella and off I goes. I made pretty near the round of the Buildings, I can tell you, my lady, afore I found 'em, but I wasn't goin' to be beaten. I'm like that, my lady, once

MISS-SENT LETTERS

I'm started on a thing. And I *did* find 'em—Deanses, I mean. They've not been long here, and such respectable people, my lady. Father's dead and this Mary's the eldest girl, and so keen to get a good place. She'd been cryin', my lady, she had indeed, at no letter comin', as she'd been hopin' for all day. And they was that pleased and obligeed! Roomatics or no roomatics, says I to myself, I'm glad I done it. Only, my lady, I'd have been still gladder for you not to find me laid up, for I did catch cold that day, I'm afraid. But you must forgive me and not think me ungrateful. I'll be up and about as hearty as ever in a day or two, no fear. And Mrs. Dean's so good to me—never a morning but what she looks in to see how I'm a gettin' on. I've not felt so friendly-like with no once since I come to London—and that's nigh upon forty years ago, for it's goin' on for twenty since my good husband died. It is that, my lady.'

MISS-SENT LETTERS

"So you see, children, I could understand why poor old Dear was in such good spirits in spite of her rheumatism. She had the reward of a good conscience —and she has also what one doesn't always get in this world, the warm gratitude of those she befriended."

The children had listened with interest. And when his mother left off speaking Harry looked up with a rather comical smile.

"I think I've got a reward I certainly *didn't* deserve, mamma. . . . I'm sure Mrs. Merchiston wants me to be great friends with them all, and I can see they're awfully nice. She said I must go to see Captain Philip Merchiston as soon as ever he arrives, and tell him all about the miss-sent letter."

A COW WITH NINE LIVES



A COW WITH NINE LIVES



COW with nine lives!" I hear somebody say. "That must be a mistake. You must mean 'a cat with nine lives'—no one ever speaks of a *cow* in that way."

No, my dear children, it is not a mistake. If you have never heard a cow spoken of in that way before, I think you will agree with me, when you have heard the adventures of Farmer Crosby's "Beauty," that the saying may be very well applied to her.

Farmer Crosby has a farm on the west coast of England. It is not a very large farm, but the situation is

A COW WITH NINE LIVES

beautiful. And though very near the sea it is not bare or desolate-looking as land on the coast often is. On the contrary there are rich meadows and lovely trees, and it is never very cold at Cliff End, as the farm is called. Nor could it have a better name, for a good part of it is in a corner as it were, just where the cliffs *do* end, though on the other side the fields slope down gently to the shore, almost *on* to the sands. So that you can sit on the grass under shady trees and hear the little waves lapping in all at the same time, which does not often happen.

Cliff End farmhouse is large and old and straggling—and the Crosbys have no children. So there are more rooms than the farmer and his wife require, and in summer they are sometimes glad to have two or three lodgers—"quiet people and not too difficult to please about their food," Mrs. Crosby says. *We* have been there several times, so I

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A COV' WITH NINE LIVES

suppose the good woman finds us quiet people. As for being easily pleased with our food at Cliff End, *I* think it would be very difficult indeed to be displeased! When you have any quantity of first-rate milk, and cream if you like—excellent butter, home-made bread, fresh eggs, and home-cured bacon and ham—not to speak of chickens and ducks and fruit and vegetables in their season—and all neatly served, with every care to make you comfortable—don't you think it would be *very* difficult not to be pleased?

Farmer Crosby does not keep a large number of cows, but those he has are very "choice." He likes to have a steady supply of milk and butter all the year round—enough for a few families who always deal with him, and for his own home use. His cows are made great pets of, and I must say they are pretty creatures. "Beauty," whom this little story is about, well deserves her

A COW WITH NINE LIVES

name. So you can understand that it was a real sorrow to the farmer and his kind wife, as well as a considerable loss of money, when a sad accident happened to four of their favourites.

It came about in this way.

The fields up at the top of the cliffs are very good pasture, and till the accident I am going to tell you of happened, nothing had ever gone wrong with the animals put to graze in them. They seemed to know by instinct that they must not go too near the edge of the precipice, for a precipice it really was.

So nobody had any fear about it, and one summer when we were staying there, we never felt at all anxious about the pretty cows, when, in passing through the "high fields" as they were called, or sometimes when looking up from the shore below, we caught sight of their smooth, silky-looking sides, as they munched away at the nice juicy grass in great content.

A COW WITH NINE LIVES

But one morning we were all startled very early—we were not quite dressed, and Mrs. Crosby's little maid was just beginning to lay the breakfast-table, so it could not have been eight o'clock—by hearing some one rushing into the yard and then into the kitchen, calling loudly for the farmer.

What was the matter?

If it had been in the night we should probably have thought that the haystacks had caught fire, but somehow in the daytime, especially early in the morning, one's thoughts do not turn to "fire" so quickly. And almost before we had time to wonder what it *could* be, we heard the explanation, as, dreading some trouble for our good friends, we hurried downstairs.

Mrs. Crosby was standing still in the midst of her "dishing up" our ham and eggs and toast, looking very white—the farmer had just dashed out of the kitchen.

A COW WITH NINE LIVES

"It's the cows, Miss," she said, wiping her eyes. "The four best we have—Beauty and those other three you've always admired so."

"But what has happened to them?" we asked.

"They've gone, Miss—gone out of the high fields, and nowhere to be seen. But there's marks of trampling—just at the edge—the cliff side of the field, you know, Miss, and the men's afraid they've fallen over. Something may have startled them, you see, Miss, in the night and set them running, not rightly knowing where they were going, poor things. And there's none of them there, and—and—"

"Could they possibly have been stolen?" we asked.

Mrs. Crosby shook her head.

"Oh dear no—such a thing could never happen. It's the cliffs, Miss, I'm thinking so of."

And the cliffs it was.

A COW WITH NINE LIVES

Almost before we had finished speaking, one of the men was seen hastening back. He looked very downcast. The farmer had sent him to break the news to Mrs. Crosby. The cows *had* fallen over the cliffs. One was lying there, just below the place where the trampled grass had been noticed, quite dead. She had been killed on the spot. And not far from her were two others, not dead, nor even, wonderful to say, badly hurt. They were going to bring them home at once, and this man was to fetch the cow doctor.

And the fourth?

She was not to be seen anywhere—she had just disappeared! They were *afraid*, the farmer and his men, that she had fallen over some distance further on, right into the sea, not into the little cove where the three others had been found. If so, she was surely drowned, and, sad to say, this "she" was the flower of the flock, pretty Beauty!

A COW WITH NINE LIVES

How poor Mrs. Crosby cried !

At first she had been rather glad that Beauty was not one of the three that *had* been found, as she hoped perhaps the favourite cow would turn up all right, having strayed off in another direction. But the day passed and there came no news of her, showing that there were no grounds for this hope, as all the neighbours had heard of the misfortune and would have been sure to find her. And night came ; and another day and another night and the Crosbys became convinced that Beauty was drowned.

It was a heavy loss—two fine cows. No farmer would think it a trifle, and Mr. Crosby is not a rich man. He tried to be glad that two were saved and getting over their injuries, but his wife could not feel glad of anything. It was not only the money loss she cared about—it was even worse than that, she said—just the thought of her

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BEAUTY MIGHT HAVE LANDED IN SOME OTHER
LITTLE COVE.

A COW WITH NINE LIVES

Beauty having come to so sad an end.

I cannot say exactly how many days had gone by—certainly nearly, if not quite, a week—when an idea struck the farmer's wife. She spoke of it to her husband, and though he did not think it much good, he was so sorry for her, that he agreed to try what she asked. This was to get a boat and row right along the coast at the foot of the cliffs, keeping as close to shore as possible. Mrs. Crosby had a faint hope that Beauty might have landed in some other little cove, out of reach of the waves.

No—that was not what had happened. It was something still more wonderful. They found her standing, or lying, I don't know which, just inside a small cave, with the sea rippling up to the very opening—how she had got there, who can say? But there, as a fact, she was, and nearly starved, poor beastie—she could not have had any-

A COW WITH NINE LIVES

thing to eat all those days—but otherwise none the worse.

It was no joke, I can tell you, to get her out—they had to tie ropes round her and draw her into the boat. "Never seed such a job in my life," said the farmer. But it was managed at last, and Beauty brought home in triumph. Luckily Mrs. Crosby had made the men take some hay in the boat, and her husband told us that the way the poor creature ate it up was "a sight to be seen."

Beauty is alive and well now. We hope to see her again next year. And do you not think I *may* call her "a cow with nine lives"?

All the same I am quite sure she will never again be put to graze in the high fields at Cliff End Farm.

A REMARKABLE CHICKEN



A REMARKABLE CHICKEN

PART I



HE boys were always being talked to about birds' - nesting. It was very necessary, one year especially, for they were in the worst

stage of the egg-collecting mania, and they had caught it badly. "Stamps" were nothing to it. And as they complained to their father one day, not without reason, what was the good of teaching them to take an interest in "natural history," and all "that sort of thing," if they were not allowed to follow it up "practically"—"practically" of course meaning just then, egg collecting!

A REMARKABLE CHICKEN

"Well," said father, "keep to a rule about it. Never take more than one egg from a nest—or at most two, if there are several. And *never*, on any account, take all."

They promised, and they kept their promise. After a time the temptation was not so great, for the number of birds in England is, after all, limited—especially in any one part of the country. And once they had two or three eggs of each kind they felt fairly satisfied—for to do them justice, they were not "extra" mischievous boys—they did not actually enjoy mischief for its own sake only.

There were still one or two melancholy vacancies in the neatly divided egg cabinet—perhaps the most conspicuous of all was the rather larger compartment labelled "owls' eggs," all ready for the occupants that had not yet come. And one day a great excitement arose in the boy world of the old rectory. Arthur nudged Myles and whispered to him,

A REMARKABLE CHICKEN

just as the servants were filing in to prayers, and Myles grew very red and looked as if he were going to choke all breakfast-time with keeping something in. Mother thought it must be fear of father's lecturing Arthur and him in the study about the whispering *almost* in prayers-time, for mother always fancied that Myles, a perfect whirligig of a boy, never still for half an instant if he could help it, was "nervous." But she changed her mind and felt her pity misplaced when she caught sight of him button-holeing Robin and pouring out a torrent of delightful news concerning some marvellous discovery or other that had come to Arthur's ears. And for the rest of the morning—it was so-called Easter holidays just then, not one of the trio was to be seen or heard of.

We, however, may know what they were about.

The secret was an owl's nest !

"It's in the old walnut-tree at the

A REMARKABLE CHICKEN

corner where the footpath runs into the wood. You know," said Arthur.

"Who told you? Was it Bill?"

Yes, of course it was Bill—the inevitable boy always to be found in one capacity or another about a country house where there are boys of a different class. Either he is the gardener's son, or the coachman's nephew, or possibly only "odd boy," whose mother is a most respectable widow in the village. But whatever his home or his family, wherever there are "Arthurs," and "Myleses," and "Robins," there is sure to be "Billy"—fairest of followers, ready for anything, possessed of really miraculous information as to the whereabouts and "howabouts" of bird and beast and fish—nay more, a perfect mine of information about adders and slow-worms, wasps and wild bees.

It was Bill who found the owl's nest—Bill who was, in his own funny way, just as excited about it as the boys.

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"IT'S THE HOLLER TREE—THE HOLLER WALNUT
TREE, MASTER ARTHUR.

A REMARKABLE CHICKEN

"It's the holler tree—the holler walnut-tree, Master Arthur," he repeated. "I've thought it for a good bit, but last night I was surer than ever. And this morning I watched till I *saw her with my own eyes.*"

Now I am not a naturalist, and here comes a hitch in my (true) story. I do not know if, when an owl is hatching her eggs, she ever leaves the nest at all? Or, supposing she does, is it during the day-time, contrary to her ordinary habits, or at dusk, or still later? I cannot tell, and as I have no Arthur or Myles, or still better, Bill, at hand to ask the hour of the wise lady's constitutional, I will frankly own that I do not know how it came to pass that the boys I am writing about were able to rob the nest in the old walnut-tree without mamma owl's interference. Was she out, or did they frighten her away? I do not know—I can only tell the fact—they found the nest and in it three eggs!

A REMARKABLE CHICKEN

How delighted they were, I need not say.

Then came other considerations—father's conditions recurred uncomfortably to their memory.

"Must we only take *one*?" said Myles, dolefully.

"Oh, I say, we might surely take two," said Robin, "just think of the time we've been waiting to find an owl's nest we could get at. Don't you think we might take two, Arthur?"

"I'd *like* to take three," said Arthur, "that'd be one each—or any way a reserve in case of accidents." For accidents do happen in egg-blowing, as everybody knows. "What do you think," he went on, "do you suppose an owl's nest *counts*, the same as thrushes, and blackbirds, and those father is so particular about? Owls don't sing—they only hoot--they're not much good. I say, why shouldn't we take all three?"

A REMARKABLE CHICKEN

Myles hesitated. He was tender-hearted.

"I suppose," he said slowly, "I suppose, all the same, they've got *feelins*—mother-owls, any way."

Arthur and Robin said nothing, but just then I think they did wish that, whether owls had them or not, Myles hadn't "*feelins*."

Suddenly—as often happened—came Bill to the rescue.

"I have it," he cried, "just you wait up there 'arf a minute, Master Arthur," and in less time than it takes to tell he had run off and was back again, carrying something carefully in his cap.

The "something" was two small hen's eggs.

"They're my very own," he said. "I've two bantams you know, as was gave me, and mother sells the eggs for me, but it don't matter for two." (*This Bill lived somewhere close at hand.*) "Put 'em in the old owl's nest, Master

A REMARKABLE CHICKEN

Arthur," he went on—"she'll find no difference, for all they say owls is so wise—and then you can take the three."

No sooner said than done. Off walked the boys in triumph, each with an owl's egg.

"But supposing she hatches the hen's eggs," said Arthur suddenly, "what'll happen then, Bill?"

"Chickens, I suppose," said Bill with a grin. "But there's no fear of that. It'd be agin' nature."

His young masters were not so clear about that—hens hatched ducks' eggs, as everybody knows. But Bill couldn't see the force of the argument.

"It'll be an experiment," said Arthur. "We must come in a day or two and look what's happened."

A REMARKABLE CHICKEN

PART II

A cood many days passed, however, before any one of the four—even Bill—thought of climbing up into the old walnut-tree again to see what was happening in the owl's nest.

To tell the truth they forgot all about it.

Arthur and his brothers placed two of the precious eggs in the compartment which had so long been awaiting them, and, as, wonderful to say, none of the three treasures had met with any accident in the process of blowing, the boys then opened negotiations with a schoolfellow at a distance as to the third and last.

The schoolfellow was suffering from the same mania as his three friends, and had met with disappointment, as they had done, about obtaining an owl's egg or eggs, and he was greatly delighted at the chance of a "swop." But so

A REMARKABLE CHICKEN

important a piece of business is not to be settled all at once or lightly. Several letters had to be written on both sides before the exact terms of exchange were decided upon, and I am sorry to have to confess that I have quite forgotten what the boys at last agreed to accept in exchange for poor Mrs. Owl's last egg. It was another egg, or eggs—that is all I know, and it came by parcel post and was luckily not broken. So the owl's egg had to be sent back in like manner, carefully swathed in cotton-wool and tissue-paper and packed in a small box. And all this letter writing and egg packing took a great deal of time and thought—so much so indeed that after it was over, I think Arthur, Myles and Robin felt for a day or two just a little tired of the labours of a collector, and looked about for other worlds to conquer in the shape of a hitherto unexplored pond which Bill recommended to their notice as "sartin sure" to contain fish doubtless waiting to be caught.

A REMARKABLE CHICKEN

But either the fish were cleverer than Bill gave them credit for being, or something was wrong with the boys' rods, *or* there were no fish to catch—anyway the attempt was a failure.

And the boys were feeling rather flat, when one morning, to their great delight, a message came in to them from Bill to say would the young gentlemen come out to speak to him as soon as they could—he wanted to show them something “very pertickler indeed ?”

Out they all trooped.

“What is it, Bill ?” they shouted all three at once.

But Bill had his own way of telling a story, and though he was grinning from ear to ear, he was not going to be hurried.

He began his tale by a question.

“You've never bin for to have a look in the owl's nest in the walnut-tree, Master Arthur ?” he said. He always addressed his remarks to Arthur in the

A REMARKABLE CHICKEN

first place, as the eldest, though they were really meant for all three.

Arthur shook his head, so did Myles, and so did Robin.

"No," they replied, "we forgot all about it. Didn't you, Bill? It's ever so long ago—the eggs we put in must be quite addled and bad by now."

"Let me see," added Arthur, "it must be three or four weeks ago, isn't it?"

"About that," said Bill, "and you're quite right, sir, I'd forgot all about it. 'Twas only last night as ever was, mother says to me, 'wasn't you going to set that there little Bantam hen of yours, Bill? I've always meant to ask you, but it slipped my memory.' I said as how the little hen hadn't been layin' so well—last week she didn't lay at all, but what mother said set me thinking of the day I put the two eggs in the owl's nest—I had been meaning to get four or five to set the hen on, but when I took the two and she started

A REMARKABLE CHICKEN

layin' so unreg'lar I didn't think of it again. But this mornin' as I were a comin' along to my work I thought I'd have a look at the holler tree, and—"here he stopped and began grinning again.

"Well," said Arthur, "hurry up—can't you? What did you see?"

"Best see for yourself, sir," said Bill, turning as he spoke to lead the way.

Again I am at a loss to tell you how they got rid of Mrs. Mother Owl. I do not know if they frightened her off the nest, or if at that hour of the day she was usually not at home. I will ask Arthur the next time I see him. But I can tell you with perfect certainty what met the boys' astonished eyes as one after the other they climbed up to look.

There—carefully seated, or lying, by itself in its foster mother's nursery, was a Bantam chicken, about ten days old—quite as flourishing and well-cared for

A REMARKABLE CHICKEN

as if it had been in its proper place in a hen-house or under a coop !

A chicken hatched and fed by an owl !
No wonder Bill grinned over such a curiosity.

The *hatching* was not the most remarkable part of it—the marvel was what had it been fed upon ?

For owlets, as everybody knows, are very different from chickens—they, little owls, I mean, are fed upon mice, insects, and in a general way what we call “animal food.” Did the small bantam take to this nourishment, or did its foster-mother show herself worthy of her name for wisdom by discovering that her nursling was of a different race from her own, and feeding it with the food natural to it ?

This no one can ever tell—as neither chickens nor owls can speak or understand human language, however clever they may be in those of clucking and hooting.

A REMARKABLE CHICKEN

And another marvel, almost greater than that of the food, soon struck the boys.

"How in the world," said Arthur, "has the creature managed not to fall out and kill itself? For chickens begin trotting about immediately?"

This was a poser—to which there could be no reply.

But it made the boys sure—and very pleased they were to feel so—that "in common humanity" the chicken must no longer be left in its present position—living "on the edge of a precipice," as Robin, who secretly prided himself on his poetical way of speaking, expressed it.

So little Miss Bantam was carefully carried off to the poultry-yard and there given over to the motherly care of an experienced hen, who had just hatched a nice little party of six or seven chickens, and there she grew and prospered and became one of the "lions" of the Vicarage. No visitors

A REMARKABLE CHICKEN

ever come there without being asked if they would not like to see the Bantam hen who was hatched and brought up for the first week or two of her life by an owl ! She has hatched several broods of chickens herself since then. I wonder if she ever tells her children the story of her early adventures ?

As for poor mother owl, who seems on the whole to have come off the worst, having been twice robbed of her younglings, I am happy to tell you that she took her loss philosophically, and is at the present moment alive and hearty—having successfully hatched her own eggs and brought up her owlets year by year without misadventure.

For father put his foot down about her. The nest in the hollow walnut-tree was never again to be despoiled.

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